

Sophocles' *Antigone*, and not knowing what to do

Hannah Willey

Sophocles' *Antigone* is often thought of as a play that shows the clash between the state and the individual, or between religious and secular values. Those clashes were certainly there for the ancient audience as well as the modern. But, as Hannah Willey here demonstrates, the tragedy of this play comes in essence from the difficulty of deciding what to do in a dilemma when there is no clear source of guidance.

How do you spot a tragic hero and how do you respond to one? Might the answers to such questions differ for an Athenian citizen sitting in the theatre of Dionysus in the mid fifth century B.C. and for a student of Greek culture reading the play in a classroom or library in the twenty-first century A.D.? How might we approach such an issue? Sophocles' *Antigone* has provoked many different responses to these questions over the last century.

The scene is Thebes: after a bitter struggle for the throne, the rival contenders – Polynices and Eteocles, products of Oedipus' incestuous relationship with his mother – lie dead at each other's hands. Their uncle Creon, their closest surviving male relative, has assumed control of the city. Outside the royal household, disaster has been largely avoided: Thebes remains standing, and the chorus thank the gods for their role in staving off the destruction threatened by Polynices and the army from Argos that supported him. One question remains: what is to be done with the bodies of the two brothers?

As his first act of office, Creon decrees that Eteocles, defender of the city, be buried with all due pomp and ceremony, but that Polynices remain unburied and unlamented, a disgraced feast for dogs and vultures for all to see. Antigone balks at the idea of her own flesh and blood going unburied. She defies Creon's edict, arguing that it contradicts the unwritten, unshakeable laws of the gods.

Antigone has spoken to many modern readers and viewers. Whether cast as a feminist symbol, a religious martyr, or a defender of the rights of the individual against an oppressive state, she has found many admirers. Nelson Mandela, incarcerated on Robben Island, played the part of Creon in a prison production of the *Antigone*; he reflected on the empathy he and his fellow political prisoners felt

towards the heroine: 'she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the ground that it was unjust.'

Might the Athenians have approved of Creon?

But would the play have elicited the same response from its original spectators? Some scholars have suggested that Creon in fact had law and custom on his side and so would have garnered more sympathy among ancient audiences than he has enjoyed in recent years.

First, as both the ruler of Thebes and Antigone's uncle and guardian, Creon is a male figure of authority in a patriarchal society dealing with a woman who is a paragon of insubordination. Beyond the gender dynamics, while we may struggle with Creon's authoritarian demands for blind obedience to his rule, is it obvious that an Athenian audience would have dismissed out of hand such an attitude? Even some of Creon's more outlandish demands can be paralleled in the public discourse of Athens, particularly in the context of Athenian imperial rule.

Thucydides reconstructed (or imagined) a debate between some Athenian envoys and the small island state of Melos which echoes strikingly (whether consciously or not) the themes of the *Antigone*. In the face of Melian resistance and appeal to divine support for their cause, Thucydides' Athenians counter that gods, like men, respect that might is right: justice has no place in a discussion of the relative claims of the strong and the weak. How we are to view this episode is controversial – does Thucydides support straightforwardly either the Melian or the Athenian position? – but clearly, some twenty or thirty years after the *Antigone*'s first performance, such views could

conceivably be attributed to the Athenians themselves.

Second, the Athenians had a law forbidding the burial of traitors and temple-robbers in Attic soil. Polynices is clearly characterized in the *Antigone* as traitor to the state. Creon describes him as an exile who sought the utter destruction of Thebes and who came, in particular, to burn the temples and dedications of the gods (lines 285 ff.) (an assessment which goes unchallenged by the other characters in the play).

Our main source for the law prohibiting the burying of traitors in the territory of Athens presents the fifth-century Athenian speaker Eurypolemus calling for Pericles' son (among others) to be tried under its terms, even though Pericles' son was one of Eurypolemus' own relatives. Eurypolemus insists that acting in this way will in no way conflict with the demands of religious piety. In both these respects, his speech chimes with Creon's own position in the *Antigone*. Another Athenian speaking in court specifies that anyone who acted to defend someone who was convicted on a charge of treachery – in the way that Antigone champions Polynices' cause – was to be himself liable to the same penalties. Might this Athenian context colour fifth-century responses to Antigone's and Creon's actions?

There are further ways in which historical Athens took control over burial away from the deceased's kin. Civic funerals for the war-dead turned the burial rites and commemoration of individuals into a celebration of collective glory. To ensure positive relations with their gods, imperial Athens went so far as to remove the tombs of all those who had previously been buried on Delos, fearing that the sacred island was polluted.

Tragedy's dilemmas

Do these considerations mean that we should view Creon as the good guy, as the hero of this play? Clearly, this is to oversimplify. Just as Thucydides' Melian dialogue may be read as either an endorsement of Athenian imperial policy or as heralding future troubles, so the action and attitudes of Sophocles' characters need

not provoke a single response. Tragedy does not deal in easy situations, it deals with serious dilemmas. Think, for example, of the story of Orestes: killing his mother left him open to much suffering, but leaving his father unavenged would not have made for an easier life. There are no unproblematic choices here. Similarly, Antigone claims to act in accordance with the will of the gods but Creon too can portray himself as a defender of the state temples, which Polynices attacked. If Creon has the Athenian law on traitors and temple-robbers partially in his corner, Antigone could have cited other Athenian laws which held relatives responsible for the proper burial of their kin. The play generates difficult and unsettling tensions and conflicts. It challenges the viewer or reader to assess which they think to be the best one – or the least problematic. It does not set up a clear hero and villain or oppose in any simple way law against religion or state against household.

Understanding the problems

But *Antigone* does not only create difficult tensions and ambiguities. The play actively reflects on the problems. It does this in part by showcasing the challenges of interpretation and the attempt to recognize and understand signs, the meaning behind a person's words or the significance of a weighty silence.

Notice how the chorus express sympathy for the competing views of both Creon and his opponents. The chorus, as they observe and comment on events alongside us, do not give us a clear-cut judgement but uncertainty and indeterminacy. The play further reflects on the difficulty of Creon's position and, by extension, the difficulty of evaluating his decisions, by reminding us of the dangers of taking anything at face value. Creon is constantly uncertain whether the chorus and other characters have been bribed and are lying to him, while Antigone and Haemon (Creon's son and Antigone's fiancé) both suspect the chorus of concealing their true views for fear of Creon. There is a refrain here of uncertainty, anxiety, and second thoughts: do we know what we think we know?

What can an ancient Greek do when faced with a problem that he is not in a position to resolve through his own independent judgement? Divination, the practice of receiving and interpreting omens or oracles from the gods, offered Greeks one way of gaining insight, confidence, or guidance concerning such problems. In the *Antigone*, the language of signs is ubiquitous – all those Greek words with 'sēm-' as their root. We pointedly encounter characters trying – and failing – to identify and interpret the signs.

Not being able to understand the signs

When one of Creon's guard arrives to announce that he and his colleagues have failed in their duty and Polynices has received a burial of sorts, he expresses bafflement about what has transpired. They found no trace (*asêmos*, 252) of the perpetrator and no signs (*sêmeia*, 257) of damage inflicted on the corpse by wild beasts or dogs, which Creon had intended. Unable to understand how any mortal could have achieved this act, the chorus-leader speculates that the guard's account may bespeak divine agency (*theêlaton*, 278). The audience know that, at least in part, this interpretation is false. Unlike the actors on stage, we know that Antigone has effected the burial but, like them, we do know neither how she did it nor whether the gods too played some role.

Again, when Antigone is hauled on stage, having been arrested by Creon's guards, the chorus label her a divine portent, but vacillate on how this sign should be interpreted ('I am in two minds about this divine portent,' 376 f.). When Creon approaches Antigone's rocky prison, intent on reversing his earlier decision and freeing her, he hears the 'unsignifying' noises of a wretched cry and voices uncertainty about what it means: 'am I a seer...or does the god deceive my ears?' (1209 ff.). When Creon arrives at the scene he sees Antigone's body, hanged by her own hand, and Haemon embracing her. Creon does not understand what is going on and wants answers: 'What deed have you done? What were you thinking? In what calamity have you been undone?' But just as Haemon's earlier cry was 'unsignifying', so now Creon is met only with stony silence and the eyes of a wild animal (1228 ff.).

Teiresias, ancient Greece's most famous diviner, blind yet able to 'see' what other men cannot, draws particular attention to the dramatic and unusual failure of the signs from the gods. Teiresias warns Creon about the consequences of his actions. He paints a vivid picture of the collapse of positive relations, and of the lines of communication, between the city and its gods. Sacrifice, prayer, and divination, he reports, have all failed. Teiresias describes a bloody perversion of standard sacrificial procedure. Instead of smoke rising up to Olympus, it is the gall-bladder which is dispersed through the air, preventing Teiresias from divining through the rite the will of the gods (1013). Similarly obscured are the signs usually to be read through the observation of birds. Their frenzied calls are unintelligible noise (*agnot'...phthoggon*, 1001), a foreign babbling language (*bebarbarômenoi*, 1002) – they provide no good sign (*oud'...eusêmous*, 1021). This obscurity is itself said to be 'not without significance' (*ouk asêmos*, 1004), but what it shows is

precisely that even the great diviner can find no clear signs from the gods.

A final revelation

The final scene of the play presents us with a revelation of sorts. What was hidden is made painfully visible and public. The doors to the palace are flung open to reveal the body of Eurydice (Creon's wife and Haemon's mother) (1293) as Creon carries Haemon's corpse in his arms, a 'significant memorial' to his failings (*mnêm' episêmon*, 1258). The chorus announce that Creon has come to 'see justice' (1270). And yet, this final disclosure does not serve to resolve or straightforwardly illuminate previous uncertainties and ambiguities. It remains difficult to navigate the balance of responsibility for what has happened – the role, if any, of some god. By contrast with other tragedies, no god appears to guide us here. By drawing attention to the difficulties which haunt the formation of judgements and the interpretation of words and signs, I have suggested, the *Antigone* not only generates the play's uncertainties and ambiguities, but actively confronts and contemplates the terrible and, perhaps, irresolvable dilemmas of the mortals who face them.

Hannah Willey is a post-doctoral research Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge. Her research particularly concerns the relationship between law and religion.